

Eight new birds for Laos

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Documented here are records of five bird species which were not, so far as I have been able to trace, previously recorded in Laos, and three further species which have previously been published for the country but without substantiating details. An additional species is removed from the Lao list. None of the birds was collected or photographed, so details of what was observed on each are given (see discussion of the desirability for this in Rasmussen and Anderton 2005). There remains no rarities committee or equivalent for bird records in Laos.

FERRUGINOUS POCHARD *Aythya nyroca*

On arrival at Nong (= lake) Thaleuth (Vientiane municipality; 18°06'N 102°05'E; 175 m) on 20 January 2009 at 16h00, within ten minutes I noticed two evident *Aythya* ducks c.250 m offshore. The only previous Lao record of the genus was one of Baer's Pochard (below); former listing of Tufted Duck *A. fuliginosa* for the country (e.g. King *et al.* 1975) presumably reflects its ambiguously given range as 'nord de l'Indochine' [=northern Indochina] in Delacour and Jabouille 1940: 99). With no reason to expect the two birds to come closer before darkness, I persuaded a villager to take me out in a wooden pirogue. This allowed excellent views of them for most of 16h50–17h20 in the soft late afternoon light down to 30 m (mostly at 50–80 m). The two birds were seen again on 26 January (poorly) and on 4 February, when I boated out and watched them for about an hour, including with a 15x telescope (from the stability of a small island) for 40 minutes as they loafed at 60 m range in good light. One was an obvious drake Ferruginous Pochard, with its warm brown plumage, including a rich burnished mahogany-toned head, neck and chest, somewhat paler flanks (at least in some lights), somewhat darker upperparts, and large pure white vent. Separating the vent and flanks was a bold-margined vertical dark line, almost black. Dividing the neck from the chest was a similarly dark line, horizontal and not clear-cut, best seen when the bird stretched its neck. The eye was almost white, perhaps ever so slightly toned pale green. The dark-grey bill had a diffuse black/ish tip, broadest about the nail, and a slight pale wash behind this tip. A bold white bar across the remiges was bright right onto the outer feathers, and a large white belly-patch had a straight, sharp division from the rich brown chest. These latter features were seen in flight and when it occasionally reared up from the water to flap its wings. The identity of the second bird, superficially similar to a scruffy male Tufted Duck but lacking any hint of a tuft, remains unresolved. Throughout observation, the birds were in or near large patches of sparse emergent rushes (rising about 15–35 cm above water) and small, scattered, patches of waterlilies (less than 5% cover of that part of the lake), and were relaxed enough to feed when I was only 30 m away—risky behaviour for a bird of this size in Laos. The dark lines afore the vent and around the lower neck are not indicated in Robson (2005a), so initially caused some concern over the bird's ancestry, but are in fact typical (Vinicombe 2000). Ageing the bird is inadvisable, because even first-winter birds may look immaculate in plumage this late in winter (Vinicombe 2000).

Villagers identified these birds as *nok pet khaa*; saying that *khaa* had no other meaning (*pet* is duck and *nok* is

bird). This, or a very similar-sounding, name is widely used for White-winged Duck *Cairinia scutulata* in Laos (Evans *et al.* 1997). They said the 'species' was present only in the cold months (November–February) and that in the last four winters only two birds had come. A decade ago, typically 6–8 birds wintered on the lake.

There are at least two previous records of Ferruginous Pochards on sandbars in the Mekong River seen from Chiang Saen, Thailand: 12 birds on 27 December 2001 (Round and Jukmongkol 2002) and 30 on 28 February 2005 (Robson 2005b). These constitute implicit Lao records, the river forming the border between the two countries. Ferruginous Pochard, listed by BirdLife International (2008a) as Near Threatened, is a locally numerous winter visitor to parts of Myanmar, with flocks of over 1,000 still occurring (Tordoff *et al.* 2008 and references therein), but is much scarcer further to the east, with a 1988–1989 survey of wetlands in north-east Thailand (Wolstencroft *et al.* 1993) recording only 1–2 birds at three sites (compared with up to 59 Baer's Pochards at eight sites). On the wetlands of the Chiang Saen plain Ferruginous has, in the last decade, become much the commoner of the two species (P. D. Round verbally 2009). Occasional occurrence in Laos is not a surprise, because it has also been recorded in east Tonkin (e.g. Štusák and Vo Quy 1986, Nguyen Duc Tu *et al.* 2006) including at Van Long Marsh in 2006 (C. R. Robson *in litt.* 2009), and there were even two records in Hong Kong up to 2000 (Carey *et al.* 2001). The population trends in Asia remain unclear (BirdLife International 2008a).

BAER'S POCHARD *Aythya baeri*

In early 2000, J. W. K. Parr (verbally 2000, 2009) saw a single male Baer's Pochard among the many Lesser Whistling-ducks *Dendrocygna javanica* around Ban (= the village of) Sivilai (Vientiane province; 18°19'N 102°37'E; 175 m), an area of embanked pools where villagers used to protect birds from hunting (Parr and Parr 1998). No description was taken because he knew the species from Thailand, and it was an adult male seen at close range in good light. To treat this record as provisional would be understandable, but based upon conversation with the observer directly after the sighting I think this would be overcautious.

The number of Baer's Pochard records from adjacent north and north-east Thailand (Wolstencroft *et al.* 1993, BirdLife International 2001, Round 2008) suggests that it might even have been regular in Laos, at least in the 1980s, but since then there have been major global population declines, numbers reaching Thailand have

dropped markedly (Round 2008) and it has been reclassified from globally threatened: Vulnerable (BirdLife International 2001) to globally threatened: Endangered (BirdLife International 2008b). Baer's Pochard has also been found in the Red River plain of northern Vietnam (where evidently very rare) and, slightly further from North Lao, in parts of southern China and Myanmar (BirdLife International 2001, Nguyen Duc Tu *et al.* 2006), all indicating that it should reach Lao at least occasionally. As a globally threatened species, clarification of its current status in Laos is an urgent conservation priority: ducks are generally scarce in the country, probably reflecting heavy hunting (Duckworth *et al.* 1999, 2002, Bezuijen 2006), and well-vegetated plains wetlands (the typical winter habitat of this species: BirdLife International 2001) are themselves already much reduced and the remaining areas are under threat (see below).

EURASIAN THICK-KNEE *Burhinus oedicephalus*

During heavy Mekong floods, on 17 August 2008, Mark Bezuijen (MB) and I went to the plains south-east of Vientiane around Nong (= pool) Pen (17°55'N 102°45'E; 165 m) in the hope of displaced birds of unusual species. As we walked between the village of Ban Xiengkhouan and Nong Pen itself, MB said excitedly 'there's a curlew flying across the road!'. Assuming he meant a *Numenius* sp., of which two species have occurred, both very rarely, in Laos (Duckworth and Tizard 2003, Timmins and Robichaud 2005), I scanned frantically in the sky: most land was under feet of water, while most of the rest held fairly thick vegetation. I could see no bird and felt even more disorientated when MB said 'it flew low across the road and I think landed over there', 'there' being an area of scrub and ruderals (particularly the carpeting invasive 1½–2½ m high *Chromolaena odorata*) with small (<10 m across) patches of short buffalo-grazed grass. This seemed utterly implausible behaviour for any curlew: after what seemed an eternity of confusion the penny dropped, by his reference to white wing-patches, that MB's use of the word 'curlew' referred to the Burhinidae, based on the hopefully soon obsolete and taxonomically misleading use of the name 'Stone-curlew' for *B. oedicephalus* in the UK. There being no record of this family from the Vientiane plain, we immediately entered the area into which it had flown and after an increasingly worrying search flushed the bird for a flight view of 2 seconds, perfectly lit, at a range of 60 m. Great Thick-knee *Esacus recurvirostris* remains, albeit much declined, widespread on the Lao Mekong (Thewlis *et al.* 1998, Duckworth *et al.* 1999, 2002) and is a plausible visitor to the plain during high water. However, while of obvious Burhinidae shape (big head, big eye, and a beak short and stout for a wader) and flight action (slow wing-beats), this bird was only half to two-thirds the bulk of a Great Thick-knee, had much less white in the wing, and was darker brown and obviously streaked in plumage. Fortunately over the next 15 minutes I had three further flight views, each of 10–30 seconds, at ranges of 15–50 m, viewed with 10×42 binoculars. The four flushing distances (thrice by one or other of us, once by a passing old woman) were at 12–30 m. At the last flush, the bird headed off, apparently beyond a large band of flooded rice. The views allowed repeated affirmation of the characters noted at the first (with particular focus that the bird truly was streaked dark on both upper- and underparts), and indicated a wing pattern

of black remiges separated from the brown upperwing-coverts by pale bands, and at least one small white patch within the spread primaries; a white tail-tip; off-white lines above and below the eye; and dull yellow on the bill.

The sole previous Lao record of Eurasian Thick-knee may be that of two birds in a rice paddy near Ban Sompoy (Attapu province; 14°30'N 106°28'E; 90 m), near the border of Xe Pian National Protected Area, on 2 March 1998 (not February, *contra* Duckworth *et al.* 1999). The observer, T. Tizard, kindly supplied a photocopy of his (laconic) field notes: the birds were flushed 'four or five' times, showing 'a very obvious small amount of white in the wing' and a 'thin dark bill' (although the bill invariably has some yellow on it). He further states (*in litt.* 2009) that the birds were obvious thick-knees rather than any other family, and were smaller and darker (with streaks) in plumage than the many Great Thick-knees he had already seen by this time. It seems unlikely that Eurasian Thick-knee is common on the Vientiane plain, because Duckworth's (2007) fairly heavy survey of agricultural habitats did not find it, but large areas of potentially suitable land on the Mekong plain downstream of Vientiane, and on some of the major tributaries (notably the Xe Kong and in Savannakhet province), have never had any serious bird survey.

These two Lao records presumably refer to the eastern form *indicus*, usually treated as a race of *B. oedicephalus*, but accorded species status by Rasmussen and Anderton (2005) through being 'very distinct from *B. oedicephalus* in proportions and vocalisations'. Vientiane may be near the species's north-eastern range limit, as it does not inhabit China (Cheng 1987). Robson (2005a) listed the bird widely in South-East Asia, including neighbouring Vietnam, Cambodia and Thailand, but with insufficient information to classify its seasonal status in many regions. The only historical records from Cambodia traced by Thomas and Poole (2003) were those of Delacour (1929), who found the species to be not uncommon around Siem Reap and Kompong Thom, in large open grassy plains (Delacour and Jabouille 1931a). Vietnamese records with locality detail come only from Pleiku (David-Beaulieu 1939), Danang (then known as Tourane; Delacour and Jabouille 1940) and (notably similar in date to this Lao record) Hanoi, where a local woman was seen carrying two live birds to market (with several snipes *Gallinago*) on 24 August 1981 (Štusák and Vo Quy 1986); this latter record, the only one ever from any part of northern Vietnam, was omitted from Robson (2000, 2005) because C. R. Robson (*in litt.* 2009) overlooked it, not because there is any reason to doubt it. There is very little recently published on its South-East Asian status, even a generally thorough global monograph stating that 'further south and east, in Pakistan, India, Sri Lanka, Thailand and elsewhere, little or nothing is known of the former distribution and numbers of breeding Stone Curlews. Of the present situation, I can only state that they are widespread throughout this enormous region, and even common here and there in suitable places' (Vaughan and Jennings 2005: 286). Timmins (2008) considered that 'the regional [= Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam] status of this species is enigmatic, due to its cryptic nature and paucity of survey work in suitable habitats'. A. W. Tordoff (*in litt.* 2008) knows of no recent Vietnamese records. P. D. Round (*in litt.* 2008) commented that, for the part of Thailand adjacent to Laos, 'I have no idea of its status

in NE Thailand. It is so unobtrusive that it could quite easily be widespread in Isan'; concentrations of up to 70 have been found around Bangkok (Round 2008), so it evidently remains reasonably common somewhere. In general in Thailand it is considered near-threatened, and to be uncommon (Sanguansombat 2005). Both Duckworth *et al.* (1999) and Timmins (2008) highlighted that, as a relatively large bird of open and fairly open habitats (i.e. overlapping much with human settlement), albeit highly cryptic, it could be under severe hunting pressure. Equally, so little observation has taken place in suitable habitat that it might prove to be unexpectedly numerous in Laos.

NARCISSUS FLYCATCHER *Ficedula narcissina*

P. S. Bourdin (*in litt.* 2006, 2009) found a male Narcissus Flycatcher in a Mekong-side Vientiane garden (just upstream of the city centre; 17°58'N 102°35'E; 165 m) on 28 March 2006, and managed three seconds of shaky video film. This (and stills from it, circulated to other birders with an interest in Lao birds) shows clearly the black upperparts with yellow supercilium and rump; the large white wing-flash; and the white belly and vent, with bright yellow breast and throat.

The nominate race, which breeds in the south Kuril islands, Sakhalin and Japan and winters in Borneo, the Philippines and Hainan (Dickinson 2003), is a vagrant in mainland South-East Asia. It has been recorded from two regions of Vietnam (Robson 2005a, Pilgrim *et al.* *in prep.*), and the first, and (until 2009, only), record for Thailand was of a single bird on 17 April 1995 at Khao Sam Roi Yot National Park (12°13'N 99°55'E) which could not be found the next day (Round and Rumsey 1997). It is a scarce annual spring migrant through Hong Kong, the last few days of March being the start of the peak month of occurrence (Carey *et al.* 2001). The green-backed form *F. n. elisae* (sometimes treated as a full species, but see Töpfer 2006), which breeds in small parts of temperate China and winters only in the Thai–Malay peninsula but has been found as a vagrant in several other parts of South-East Asia (Round and Rumsey 1997, Dickinson 2003, Robson 2005a), has not yet been recorded in Laos.

JAPANESE ROBIN *Erithacus akahige*

Robichaud (1999) observed a robin at close range within dense but short-stature evergreen forest on Phou Vang (in Nakai–Nam Theun National Protected Area, Khammouan province; c.17°48'N 105°33'E; c.1,450 m) on 13 December 1998 and 1 January 1999, in a narrow, steep, boulder-strewn, nearly dry stream-bed, apparently coming to a weeping rock, perhaps to drink. It had an orange head, face and upper breast, a grey belly and clean white undertail-coverts, and rufous upperparts with a more orangey tail. A nearby bird, perhaps a female, was seen only briefly. These descriptive notes were omitted from the final report of the survey (Robichaud and Stuart 1999) in anticipation of subsequent formal publication of the record. They are sketchy for a species otherwise unrecorded in the country, but the sighting was discussed directly afterwards with P. Davidson and JWD and then included, without caveat, in Duckworth *et al.* (1999). W. G. Robichaud (*in litt.* 2009) reviewed his notes and memory and added that, within the size-range of robins in Lao (which range up to Oriental Magpie Robin *Copsychus*

saularis), it was rather small. No other South-East Asian bird of this size shares an orange head and grey belly (see Robson 2005a). Eurasian Robin *E. rubecula*, perhaps the most similar species in Eurasia, is an implausible vagrant. WGR, an American, knew at time of observation neither species, and so did not check points to distinguish the two. Reviewing the record a decade on, with examination of many photographs of both species on the Internet, WGR pointed out that Eurasian Robin would be unlikely to stimulate his description as having an orange head (whereas this fits Japanese Robin, especially if seen from the side, where the brown crown and nape are not so obvious) or with orange otherwise confined to the upper breast (in Eurasian Robin the entire breast is red in all post-juvenile plumages, while juveniles are entirely different; lacking any orange or red breast-patch, or grey underparts: Collar 2005). The microhabitat, a boulder-rich forest stream, is perfect for the species (Collar 2005).

Japanese Robin breeds in Japan, Sakhalin and the south Kuril islands; its winter range is poorly known but is apparently south to east China and the Ryukyu islands (Dickinson 2003, King 2008). South-East Asia seems too far south to hold the species commonly; Carey *et al.* (2001) traced only ten records from Hong Kong, mostly between mid-December and late March. However, there are records from several regions of Thailand, where it now occurs almost annually (e.g. King 2008, Robson 2005a, 2007, 2008) and, in Vietnam, from East Tonkin and Central Annam (C. R. Robson in Crosby 1995, Robson 2005a).

[LIGHT-VENTED BULBUL *Pycnonotus sinensis*

Duckworth *et al.* (1999) included one Lao record of this species, an unpublished sighting of a single bird assigned to *P. s. sinensis* in low-altitude limestone scrub near the southern tip of Nam Kading NPA in January 1999. The observer (T. D. Evans *in litt.* 2009) saw similar birds again at the same site on 4 and 11 February 1999, and his review of field notes suggests that (at least on the middle date) these were more likely to be the then-undescribed Bare-faced Bulbul *Pycnonotus* sp. (see Woxvold *et al.* this issue). Fishpool and Tobias (2005) stated of the nominate *P. sinensis* that 'small numbers reach North Laos' and of *P. s. hainanus* that it is a 'winter vagrant in C Laos'; the basis for occurrence in C Laos may simply stem from Robson (2000), who seems to have placed some of Nam Kading in C Laos, but the basis for statement that *P. s. hainanus* occurs cannot now be traced (J. A. Tobias *in litt.* 2008). There therefore seems to be no specific record from Laos. However, it is likely that this bulbul will be found to visit the country: it is an abundant resident in and winter visitor to Hong Kong (Carey *et al.* 2001) and a common winter visitor to north and central Vietnam, also an uncommon resident in East Tonkin (Delacour and Jabouille 1931b, Štusák and Vo Quy 1986, Robson 2005a). And on 30 December 1988, J. A. Wolstencroft (*in litt.* 2006) and M. Goodey obtained excellent views of two individuals of the nominate race in adjacent north-east Thailand, at Beung Kong Long No-Hunting Area (17°58'–18°03'N 103°59'–104°02'E; coincidentally, almost directly over the Mekong from the Nam Kading NPA); and on a repeat visit there (8 February 1989) found at least eleven, probably 17 or more, of them; these records were omitted from the report of the survey (Wolstencroft *et al.* 1993) because the species is not a waterbird.]

WOOD WARBLER *Phylloscopus sibilatrix*

On 9 December 2008 I was waiting at the Lane Xang Minerals Ltd mine headquarters, Savannakhet province (16°57'49"N 105°59'09"E; c.220 m) when a passerine landed in some ornamental trees amid chalets and commenced foraging in the mid-storey, perfectly lit in the 07h45 morning sun, 9 m from me. I was instantly astonished to see a large warbler dramatically different from any common Lao species and after momentary thoughts of a green *Hippolais* realised that it was a Wood Warbler. The bird was in view through 10×42 binoculars for about 2 minutes, at 9–12 m range, and moved actively at about 2.5–4.5 m above ground in the outer small branches of various small trees. It was only briefly significantly obscured by foliage. It then flew off over a chalet to another patch of trees, and I had to leave for a meeting. It was highly distinctive, compared with *Phylloscopus* species regularly encountered in Laos, by its large bulk, brightness of plumage, and lack of any wing-bars, tertial spots, or crown-stripe. The upperparts were bright green with a faint grey 'bloom' apparent at some angles; the folded remiges were fringed an even brighter green. The breast and supercilium were bright primrose-yellow, contrasting with the silvery-white belly, flanks and vent. The division between the yellow and white was discrete, although not with a straight-line border; the precise pattern was not noted. Both the bill and legs were sturdy (for a *Phylloscopus*) and at least partly bright orange-flesh. The very long wings reaching well down the tail and the high domed head combined with the plumage colours to give an appearance totally dissimilar to any common Lao congener. The bird was silent.

I was already familiar with Wood Warbler through growing up in the UK, and there is no real confusion species anywhere in the world. Among leaf warblers yet recorded in Laos only Yellow-vented Warbler *P. cantator* shares this sort of bright plumage with a white belly; but it has a bright yellow vent, a boldly striped head and is entirely different in shape and size. Tickell's Leaf Warbler *P. affinis* and Arctic Warbler *P. borealis* of the race *P. b. xanthodryas* are also bright-coloured and might yet be found in Laos, but both lack a bright white belly and the former lacks bright green upperparts while the latter has bold wing-bars. 'Green Warbler' *P. [trochiloides] nitidus* is perhaps the highest risk of confusion, and winters regularly in South Asia, occurring occasionally east to Bangladesh (Bairlein *et al.* 2006), but is readily distinguished by bold wing-bars (which might, however, be abraded when worn), the lack of bright fringing to folded remiges, and has the shape (including shorter wings than a Wood Warbler) of Greenish Warbler *P. trochiloides*, a species (*s.l.*) abundant in Laos (e.g. Thewlis *et al.* 1996) and of which several were seen daily during the present survey. Among species not known from tropical Asia, both Eastern and Western Bonelli's Warblers *P. orientalis* and *P. bonelli* show some similarities to Wood Warbler, but differ in a number of obvious ways, e.g. neither shows bright primrose-yellow on the underparts or supercilium. There are no possible confusion species in the allied genera *Seicercus*, *Tickellia* or *Abroscopus*. The bright-coloured *Hippolais* species Icterine and Melodious Warblers *H. icterina* and *H. polyglotta*, neither recorded ever from South-East Asia, were excluded by the head shape and underpart colour pattern, and lack of their distinctive 'jizz' (with which I am familiar from England and Germany).

This appears to be the first record for South-East Asia as the species is not in Robson (2005a), and may even be the first for tropical Asia, because T. P. Inskipp (*in litt.* 2008) knows of no record from the Indian subcontinent; nor has it yet been found in Hong Kong (Carey *et al.* 2001, G. J. Carey *in litt.* 2008). The grey bloom noted on the upperparts suggests my bird might have been a juvenile (see Bairlein *et al.* 2006), the most common age-class among extreme vagrants in most species (Lewington *et al.* 1991). Wood Warbler breeds in Europe and east to the north-east and eastern Altai (Ernst 1991), rather further to the east than is conventionally accepted based on, e.g., Stresemann (1955). Its non-breeding range is a latitudinal belt across the centre of Africa, south of the Sahara (Bairlein *et al.* 2006). It is a proven long-distance vagrant, perhaps reflecting the long and complex route of the Siberian breeding populations which, in order to winter in Africa, may fly mostly west for over 4,000 km before turning to a more southerly direction (Wernham *et al.* 2002); thus, if undertaking a reverse migration of similar distance, arrivals in the north Pacific are explicable (there is no evidence to support the proposal by Ernst [1991] of a central Asian wintering ground for eastern populations). There are multiple records from the Asia-Pacific region: one collected in the Aleutians (Alaska, USA) on 9 October 1978 (Gibson 1981); one in the Pribilof islands in October 2004 (Alaska, USA; Pranty *et al.* 2008); a total of 16 records of singles (eight in September, seven in October and one on 2 November 2004) from Japan in Japan Records Committee (2005) including the first from the country on 8 October 1984 (Brazil 1991); one photographed at Tok-do, southern Korea, on 13 September 2007 (Kim Jae-Woon *per* N. Moores *in litt.* 2008); and a rare passage migrant in west Mongolia, extremely rare further east in the country (Ernst 1991, Kováts 1997, Kováts and Halmos 1998; A. Bräunlich *in litt.* 2008). Closer to Laos, there are various records from China: one from Yangbajain, Damxung, in southern Xizang Autonomous Region (Tibet) in September (30°05'N 90°33'E; Cheng 1987); one in Jiangsu Province, east China, around 22 September 2008 (*per* G. J. Carey *in litt.* 2008); and one at Turpan, Xinjiang province, on 20 September 2004, apparently not the first for the province (G. J. Carey *in litt.* 2008). The species has also strayed to the Indian Ocean islands, with two records of single birds from the Seychelles, from Aldabra and Cousin in November and December (Skerrett and Seychelles Bird Records Committee 2001, Skerrett *et al.* 2006), matching this Lao record in season.

STREAKED WEAVER *Ploceus manyar*

Xe Pian National Protected Area is one of the most important areas in the Lao protected area system for birds (Thewlis *et al.* 1998) and was the first to have a modern survey, in 1992–1993 (Thewlis *et al.* 1996). This focused on forests, yet subsequent survey across Laos indicated that its wetlands were also likely to be of high national significance to birds. Thus, during a survey of the Pathoumphon district (Champasak province) in December 2007–January 2008, I spent as much time as possible in the wetlands, notably the large (800 ha; Claridge 1996) Bung Gnai-Kiatngong. In its eastern part, about 14°45'58"N 106°04'14"E (150 m), on 12 January 2008 I saw from a distance and against the light a flying flock of c.30 small passerines which looked out of the

common order, and so waded across to view them, using 10×42 binoculars at 5–9 m range in perfect sunlight for a total of about five minutes spread across half-an-hour. They were feeding in and around a small stand of living *Sesbania*, amid grazed wet grass, and were relatively shy and skulking; but about half could be confirmed as Streaked Weavers. No breeding-plumage males were present. All birds seen well were basically brown and recalled sparrows *Passer* somewhat in size and bill shape. They showed a bright, clear, well-defined, yellow spot in the lower rear of the side-neck; a bold, bright, nearly white supercilium; heavy dark streaks on the breast and flanks; heavy dark streak-blotches on the upperparts; black tertials with heavy buff edging; and thick pinkish bills. The flock kept up a near-continuous chorus of harsh trills, chuckles and stutters. There were about c.20 in the same *Sesbania* stand on 16 January, as well as two amid a flock of about 15 weavers, mostly Baya Weavers *P. philippinus*, a few hundred metres away in bushes on a small rocky outcrop projecting from the swamp.

A few months later, on 5 July 2008, with Mark Bezuijen (MB) I visited the Pakxan wetlands, Bolikhamxai province: one of the largest wetland complexes remaining on the Lao Mekong plain (Claridge 1996). A colony of at least 60 nests (perhaps only one complete) was located at 18°23'00"N 103°41'30"E (150 m); MB located another 12 or so nests nearby and, accounting for areas not easily visible, there may have been 100 nests in all. The proportion which were 'cock swings' (i.e. unfinished display nests built by males: Round 2008) was not estimated. The completed nest was a ball with a small down-pointing entrance tube. All nests were of dead, brown, vegetation, whereas Baya Weaver nests are constructed of green material (personal observations at this site, May 2005), so were either in deterioration, or were being built with long-dead plant material. The nests were all in the invasive shrub *Mimosa pigra* above standing water and about 15 Streaked Weavers, including four singing males in breeding plumage (and no weavers of any other species), were in the area.

Finally, on 5 August 2008, I saw at Wat (= temple) Simouang, Vientiane, among the women selling caged birds for merit-making release (see van Zalinge 1999 for Cambodia), two vendors with single Streaked Weavers, both in non-breeding plumage. One was alone, the other shared its cage with a single Baya Weaver and single Scaly-breasted Munia *Lonchura punctulata*. This is the only time, in fairly regular checks (sometimes several per week) during 2007–2008 that the species was present. The vendors did not consider it anything special, and when asked its origin indicated 'from the *pa* [usually taken as 'forest', but here best seen as equivalent to 'the wilds'] over there', gesturing non-specifically inland. At further questioning they eventually said the birds had originated in Thailand; but this seemed like an attempt to end the conversation when it became obvious I was not going to purchase the birds. It is inherently improbable that they would disclose the real location, through fear of competitive undercutting; and it is also fairly unlikely that they would trouble to acquaint themselves with it in the first place. Around Vientiane there may remain some suitable habitat; even into the early 1990s, the Bung That Louang–Salakham complex (over 20 km²) was probably among the most significant sites in the country for small swampland birds, but ongoing piecemeal encroachment

for rice (Claridge 1996) has since been overtaken by major conversion to paddy, and semi-natural habitats are largely destroyed (personal observations). A local origin is possible for these birds, but cannot be assumed.

These turn out to be not the first Lao records of Streaked Weaver. The Yale Peabody Museum (YPM), New Haven, USA, holds two specimens, collected on 2 and 12 October 1944 in Savannakhet (whether the town or province of that name is not clear; Central Laos) by A. David-Beaulieu (K. Zyskowski *in litt.* 2007). David-Beaulieu (1949–1950) left his records of weavers from the province, where they seemed very rare (and he never found a nest), unidentified, and Ripley (1953), who oversaw the acquisition of a large part of the David-Beaulieu collection by YPM, did not discuss them at all. K. Zyskowski (*in litt.* 2007) kindly provided photographs of these specimens, which can (with today's understanding of weaver plumages) readily be identified as female/young Streaked Weaver, with yellow neck-spot, off-white supercilium and bold dark malar, among other characters. Streaking on the underparts is rather limited and the breast is washed strongly buffy; these are features typical of juveniles (Round 2008).

Despite this pulse of records, Streaked Weaver is undoubtedly scarce in Laos, given its dependence on tall swamp habitats in more extensive marshy areas (Thomas and Poole 2003, Round 2008). It is basically a resident in South-East Asia (Robson 2005a), but as a wetland associate, the strong seasonality of rainfall in the Mekong basin and hence in wetland characters means that it is likely to be quite mobile. It has recently been found for the first time in adjoining north-east Thailand, in Udon Thani province: there were 5–6 birds at Nong Samrong on 7 March 2007 (P. Bawden in Robson 2007) and 200 in tall reeds at Nong Han Kumphawapi on 17 October 2007 (P. Burapha and P. D. Round in Robson 2008). In general in Thailand it is considered near-threatened, and an 'uncommon resident... much reduced by human persecution' (Sanguansombat 2005: 142), while Round (2008) considered that 'it may now be the most threatened weaver species nationally'. It seems also to have declined in Cambodia, where it is generally the rarest of the weavers, but does persist locally in the upper Cambodian Mekong (Thomas and Poole 2003, Timmins *et al.* 2003, Timmins 2008), south of Xe Pian NPA. The current status in Vietnam is difficult to determine but it evidently occurs locally in the Mekong delta (Buckton & Safford 2004) and A. W. Tordoff (*in litt.* 2008) knows of additional recent records from Chu Prong (border of Central with South Annam) and Cat Tien National Park (Cochinchina). Even historically it was considered as local and uncommon in Indochina (Delacour and Jabouille 1931b). While single records around Vientiane or other urban centres would have a cloud of suspicion over origin as potentially relating to merit releases (with hindsight, the likely source of those recorded for the Mekong waterfront in Phnom Penh by Duckworth and Hedges 1998), the presence of flocks deep within two of the least converted wetland complexes of the Lao Mekong plain indicates a natural origin.

RED AVADAVAT *Amandava amandava*

On 1 October 2005, P. S. Bourdin (*in litt.* 2006, 2009) found a group of three Red Avadavats, consisting of a male and two female or young birds, in rank grass in an irrigation ditch through dry rice paddies near Ban

Nongping, Chanthabouli district on the outskirts of Vientiane (18°02'N 102°35'E; 165 m). New to Laos, he did not realise at the time of sighting its significance, and took no descriptive notes; but by fortunate chance his non-birding brother-in-law was with him, and so as to show him something 'a bit spectacular', the perched male was viewed for some time through a telescope. Despite several further visits in the next two months, the avadavats were not found again; during this time the vegetation dried and burned.

Even though no notes were taken a male avadavat must be among the most distinctive birds of South-East Asia ('unmistakable': Round 2008: 168) when viewed, perched, through a telescope. Because Red Avadavat is common in the cagebird trade (including merit-release) in Cambodia (van Zalinge 1999) and Thailand (Round 2008) there must be some possibility of trade into Laos. However, despite many checks of merit-birds at Vientiane temples, visits to cagebird traders and lengthy walks round towns peeking at cagebirds in private houses and gardens, JWD has never seen one. On balance these seem likely to have been wild birds.

Red Avadavat is assumed to be resident in South-East Asia (Robson 2005a) but, as with Streaked Weaver, is likely to make some level of seasonal movement between sites. Robson (2002) mapped a localised distribution for Red Avadavat in Thailand, in the far north (abutting the upper Lao Mekong) and a fairly large area around Bangkok, but it has subsequently been found in north-east Thailand, over the Mekong from the Vientiane plain, and indeed a minimum of 170 at Nong Samrong on 7 March 2007 was the highest count for any site in Thailand (P. Bawden in Robson 2007). In general in that country it is considered near-threatened, and an uncommon resident very much reduced by human persecution, specifically for the bird trade (Sanguansombat 2005). Elsewhere in South-East Asia it occurs widely in Myanmar and Cambodia, but in Vietnam it has been recorded only in Tonkin and Cochinchina (Delacour and Jabouille 1931b, Nguyen Duc Tu *et al.* 2001, Robson 2005a). It underwent a historical decline in Cambodia, perhaps driven by long-term large-scale trapping (Delacour and Jabouille 1931b, Thomas and Poole 2003) and today is rather rare and localised (C. M. Poole *in litt.* 2008). An indication of how localised is this species is that there are no recent records from the Vietnamese Mekong delta; indeed the only records ever are from Tirant (1879), and thus questionable (Buckton & Safford 2004).

Concluding remarks

These records include five long-distance migrants of which one is certainly only a vagrant to Laos (Wood Warbler), one is likely to be (Narcissus Flycatcher), and three may yet found to be a scarce winter visitors (both pochards and Japanese Robin). Many more Palaearctic migrants which are known from adjacent countries have not yet been recorded in Laos, and many of these will no doubt be found with further searching. The other three species here discussed are resident, and with the two pochards, are more interesting from a conservation and faunistic point of view. Four inhabit well-vegetated non-forest wetlands (the two pochards, Streaked Weaver and Red Avadavat) and the fifth open areas, although precise habitats are not known in this part of its range (Eurasian Thick-knee). The lack of previous Lao records of these

five species is in part a reflection of the limited survey of non-forest habitats to date: most 1990s surveys related to the evolving national protected area system, itself focused around large forest landscapes at the expense of other habitat types, particularly wetlands (Chape 2001, Robichaud *et al.* 2001). However, survey of non-forest habitats in Laos has been just about enough in the last decade to be fairly confident that both pochards and both passerines are, at best, genuinely scarce and localised in Laos. Despite the appearance of Streaked Weavers at three different sites within a few months, a recent genuine range expansion by it, or by Red Avadavat, is unlikely given the reduction of swamps in Laos (Duckworth and Evans 2007) and great scarcity (presumably driven through persecution) of even the commonest Lao weaver, Baya Weaver (Duckworth *et al.* 2002). The status of the thick-knee remains opaque.

This collation raises the concern of how to treat reports of species new to the country but lacking conclusive supporting notes, or even any notes. Observers, particularly when fielded by conservation projects, are unlikely to pay significant attention to individuals of species which may be only erratic visitors to Laos and of no great conservation significance. Particularly with short-term visitors, who may be highly competent and regionally experienced, it may not even 'click' at the time of sighting that the record is of distributional significance. Accepting that well into the future levels of 'birding' in Laos will remain low, it would not help evolving understanding of the Lao avifauna to dismiss all records not supported by notes, even though this is optimal in countries with high levels of bird survey and/or recreational birding. Instead, the most useful course seems to be to document, for each unusual record, exactly what was seen, in order to allow the fullest consideration of them within a future national review of Lao bird records comparable to the model example for Hong Kong (Carey *et al.* 2001), where decisions on these potential firsts can be informed by future patterns of records.

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